Title: Fairbury's Rich History of Discovering Native American Artifacts

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Fairbury Blade Newspaper

July 24, 2019

About 10,000 years ago, the Fairbury area was covered with Ice Age glaciers up to one mile thick. So much water was tied up in the formation of these vast glaciers that the ocean sea level dropped. The lowered sea level exposed a land bridge between Asia and Alaska. The first humans to come to North America walked across this land bridge into what is now Alaska. When the glaciers melted, these early humans continued to move south until they occupied the Fairbury area.

If people have been in the Fairbury area for about 8,000 years, this means over 266 generations of people have lived in our area. Archeologists divide these 8,000 years into five different cultures. These five groups include the Paleo Indian, Archaic, Woodland, Mississippian, and Late Prehistoric cultures. These different groups lived differently and used different kinds of weapons and tools. Experts in this field can date artifacts into one of these five different cultural periods.

Fairbury area citizens have been finding artifacts in the farm fields since Major Valentine Darnall, the first pioneer, arrived south of Fairbury in 1829. A review of the historical Blade newspaper archives since 1871 revealed the peak of published accounts of discovering Native American artifacts occurred in the 1940s.

In 1941, a Pantagraph newspaper story recounted the formation of the Fairbury Archaeological Society. This group of Fairbury men held a meeting every two weeks. They studied Indian lore in the cold winter months and took field trips in the warmer months. This group sponsored and conducted seven special meetings which were attended by artifact collectors from all over Central Illinois.

Benjamin Nussbaum was President of the Fairbury Archaeological Society. Vice-President was Burbon Downing. Edgar Zook was Secretary, and Wade Simmons was Treasurer. The group had a total of ten members. Marion Knott was one of the club members.

The 1941 Pantagraph article also noted that Livingston County was one of the leading counties in the state of Illinois for Indian lore. Eminent students of early history stated that two main Indian trails crossed just south of Fairbury. Only seven counties in Illinois had two principal Indian trails running through them.

This same Pantagraph article also recounted the Grand Kickapoo village, the largest community of the entire tribe in Illinois, was located about three and a half miles south of

Fairbury. Local Fairbury archaeologist found that frequent visits to this site rewarded them with many treasures from the earlier civilizations.

The Kickapoo village was located south of Fairbury from about 1828 to 1830. The village moved about ten miles straight east to Oliver's Grove in 1830. They stayed at that site south of Chatsworth until they were forced to leave the state in 1832. They moved to Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and Mexico. The web site of the Kickapoo in Oklahoma has more historical information on their tribe.

May of 1948 proved to be the most exciting discovery ever made by the Fairbury Archaeological Society. Six miles north of Fairbury, where Indian Creek empties into the Vermilion River, a burned-out structure was being excavated for a new house. When some artifacts were found, digging was stopped. P. C. James, the land-owner, gave permission to the Fairbury Archaeological Society to carefully excavate the site.

Edgar Zook, Marion Knott, Guy Slater, Clinton Harris, Willis Harris, Jr., and Don Merrill of Fairbury participated in this archaeological dig. Ed Antanitus of Oglesby also attended. Club president Ben Nussbaum was unable to be present. This group carefully used trowels, whisk brooms, and spatulas to excavate the site. They also took measurements and photographs of the project.

They found a human skeleton, on its left side with the knees flexed and facing the southwest. The skeleton was in an excellent state of preservation. Evidence indicated the person had suffered a violent death. A two-inch gash, which could have been made by a blunt-edged weapon, was on the right side of the skull. The lower jaw bone was also broken.

Other artifacts at the site indicated the burial dated back to the Woodland culture. This culture existed between 500 A.D. and 1,500 A.D. On the right arm of the skeleton was a crude, leaf-shaped arrow of quartzite and the middle part of a flat drill. Beneath the skeleton was a five-inch split-bone awl. The awl was very sharp and highly polished from much use.

All of the measurements and photographs of the site were sent to Dr. John C. McGregor, Chief Archaeologist at the Illinois State Museum in Springfield. The skull was sent to Bartlett Frost, Dioramist, at the Illinois State Museum. Mr. Frost had developed a method of reconstructing faces using skulls recovered from archaeological sites. These reconstructions present a very accurate likeness of the original subject.

In the 1980s, the Illinois State Museum in Springfield opened their Peoples of the Past exhibit. This exhibit includes five diorama scenes of Native Americans in Illinois. These dioramas are full-scale size and give a very accurate view of the daily lives of these peoples. It is possible that information gathered from the Fairbury 1948 excavation was used to help construct these wonderful exhibits that help bring to life Illinois' rich Native American heritage.

Since more than 266 generations of Native Americans lived in our area and left some of their artifacts, many more artifacts will likely continue to be discovered in the future.